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ABSTRACT

In terms of structure, the play "Othello" is a distortion of an initiation ritual. Arnold van Gennep, in his book "The Rites of Passage," reduces all initiation rituals into three definable phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. The general pattern of the initiation ritual in "Othello" is as follows: Othello and Desdemona are separated from home (Venice); they go to a land of adventure (Cyprus); and they are initiated by a shaman (Iago) on the truths which they are to believe. In the case of "Othello" the second stage of the normal initiation ritual, "transition," breaks down because the shaman, Iago, does not teach the truth. An initiation ritual also involves the rebirth of the candidate. In a profound psychological way all the characters in the play separate themselves from their former identities in order to become new people: Othello becomes husband, rather than general; Desdemona becomes wife; Iago becomes deceitful; Cassio becomes lieutenant; and Emilia becomes a lady's attendant. The attempts by all the characters to become new and different people generate the dramatic tensions which result in the inevitable catastrophe of the play. (1L)

MYTH AND RITUAL IN OTHELLO: A TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING

James V. Holleran

First I must confess that I may be here under false pretense. I

have never taught a course in mythology. Nor have I ever taken a course in mythology. I am, however, very interested in mythology and I regularly sneak a highly modified version of it into my Shakespeare class at the University of Missouri under the disguise of myth-ritual criticism. As you know, the myth-ritual approach to literature is currently fashionable with English teachers. Many of us have embraced it as our predecessors borrowed the most interesting ideas from Plato and Freud and anyone else whose thinking might assist in a fuller understanding of literature. As heirs to such a rich tradition of borrowing when and where we can, I see no reason for us to be timid or apologetic about plunging head first into mythology--whether it be teaching mythology as a course or using some version of mythology as a part of a literary approach.

Of course, I am fully aware that enthusiasm does not guarantee meaningful results; and I am also fully aware that plunging into myth-ritual criticism is at best a risky business--mainly because it entails the application of a whole corporation of disciplines, such as archaeology, anthropology, art history, classical studies, sociology, psychology, and the history of religions. It is little wonder that only the brave, or perhaps foolhardy, English teacher tries to adopt some of the findings of these disciplines and bring them to bear on a piece of literature. It is also little wonder that the application is rarely well done.

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Having alerted you to my modest knowledge about mythology and having given you fair warning about the difficulty of applying the myth-ritual approach to literature, I am now prepared to meet your lowest expectations. In other words, I am ready to say something about Myth and Ritual in Othello: a Technique for Teaching.

Since the term "myth" may be taken to mean almost anything ranging from Santa Claus to Christianity, and since "ritual" might mean anything from a religious service to a football game, permit me to begin with a few simplified definitions.

First, I use the term "myth" to mean the basic truth or truths upon which the work of literature rests. In the case of Othello I take the ultimate truth to be one of purification. Reduced to its most primitive utterance, the play states that the evil which Iago has introduced into the world of the play is exposed and cured by the deaths of Othello and Desdemona. As the ancient Greeks would say, through suffering one comes to knowledge.

The use of the term myth in this generalized sense is neither shockingly new, nor, I might add, is it very negotiable as an approach to Shakespeare or other literature. Other Shakespeare tragedies bear the same mythic message: in Romeo and Juliet, for example, feuding families come to peace when their children die; in Hamlet, Denmark rids itself of rot by the death of a noble prince; in the Roman Plays, Rome is made safe when its generals die. And, quite apart from Shakespeare, mythic purification is

a basic element in other tragedies, since tragedies deal with the curing of evil at the expense of something precious.

Then why define myth in such general terms? I wish only to establish the following points: first, I do not take the term myth to mean a childish fantasy, or an amusing fiction. Nor, second, do I use the term myth in the sense of mythic analogues: I do not, for example, intend to relate Othello to any literary archetype as Fergusson related Hamlet to Oedipus. As far as I am concerned, the play's myth is the play's truth. And, third, I shall try to show that Shakespeare arrives at the ultimate truth of the play Othello--purification--by dramatizing the conflict of two opposing myths about the nature of reality. One myth says that reality is what it appears to be; the other, that reality is not what it appears to be.

What interests me most, however, about this conflict of myths is the form in which the conflict is dramatized--which brings me to the term "ritual." By ritual I mean those formal actions or ceremonies which man has devised to commemorate his most sacred beliefs. For example, ritualistic ceremonies invariably surround events such as birth, marriage, death, and the formulaic actions which are customarily devised to keep us spiritually, psychologically, and physically healthy. With Othello in mind, I invite your special attention to one particular kind of ritual: the ritual of initiation. My purpose is to show that, in terms of structure, the play Othello is a distortion of an initiation ritual.

Though initiation rituals exist in different forms in various societies, scholars have abstracted a viable archetype for the study of literature. According to the distinguished anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, (The Rites of Passage), for example, all initiation rituals may be reduced to three definable phases which he calls SEPARATION, TRANSITION, and INCORPORATION. In more concrete terms, this means that anyone who is to be properly oriented in his society, anyone who is to be properly adjusted spiritually, psychologically, and physically must undergo the formal ceremony of an initiation ritual. This initiation ritual follows a set pattern: first, the candidate is separated from his adolescent security (home and mother), then he passes through a transition period of adventure in which he learns the truths (myths or philosophy) of his culture from a shaman (high priest or instructor); and finally he is returned to and incorporated into the adult community (tribe or village). Such initiation rituals are so common in all societies that it is virtually impossible to conceive of man in societal relationships without his being exposed to some form of initiation rituals whether they may be religious, social, fraternal, or academic communities. I am not only thinking of the hundreds of the novice knights of romance who rode out on adventurous quests and returned veterans with new knowledge. I am also thinking of our own students who separate themselves from home in order to come to our adventurous campuses where they learn the myths of our culture from shamen, who are called professors. After we teach them our myths, we send them back to our tribes--new, independent, and different persons.

Like my definition of myth as a basic truth, this definition of ritual may also appear at first to be too generalized to produce anything but vague, tentative and highly arbitrary observations when applied specifically to Shakespeare's Othello. But let us see.

The general pattern of an initiation ritual in Othello may perhaps be already clear from my preliminary observations. Othello and Desdemona are separated from home (Venice); they go to a land of adventure (Cyprus); and they are initiated by a shaman (Iago) on the truths which they are to believe. But tragically they never get back to their tribe. If they had, the play Othello would have been a comedy like many of Shakespeare's other comedies in which young lovers flee from court, castle, or parent to a forest, meet with adventure, and then return with their problems solved. What happens, however, in a tragedy is that the ritual doesn't work. In the case of Othello, the second stage of the normal initiation ritual, TRANSITION, breaks down because the shaman, Iago, did not teach the truth.

Were the application of an initiation ritual to Othello to reveal only this sort of basic dramatic pattern, it would still be worth pointing out because even at this preliminary level of observation we see that the initiation ritual provides a context which partly explains why Othello and his entourage leave Venice and go to Cyprus, and furthermore why Shakespeare may have called off the Turkish invasion. Were a war raging, Iago would be left with little opportunity to offer his instruction.

Still, if the initiation ritual is a valid structural approach to Othello, it must tell us a good deal more about the particulars of the play. I think it does. Consider, for example, what it tells us about characterization.

In addition to a geographic movement in the play from one place to another (from Venice to Cyprus) an initiation ritual also involves the rebirth of the candidate: he gives up his old self in order to assume a new identity. In anthropological terms, the young Indian brave leaves the women of the tribe, goes out into the forest, meets adventures, undergoes a symbolic death, and then returns to the men with a new name, Thunderbird, perhaps. In terms of Shakespeare's play, when Othello's ships sail from Venice, they are full of people attempting to make a change in their ideas, appearance, station, title, interest, or attitude. In different ways, all the characters try to change their former selves, assume new identities, and be reborn into a new world, a world in which these new identities will be tested. Iago, for example, assumes a new philosophy of life: he was honest Iago; now he says "I am not what I am." Roderigo was a curled darling of Venice; now he sells his land, puts on a beard and goes to war. Michael Cassio was a cadet; now he is the envied lieutenant. Othello was a General; now he's also a husband. Desdemona was the shy daughter of a Senator; now she's the courageous wife of the General. Even Emilia has a new role; she becomes a lady's attendant.

Separation, then, in Othello is not simply a geographic matter of leaving Venice and going to Cyprus. In a much more profound psychological

sense, all the characters in the play separate themselves from their former identities in order to become new people. It is, of course, the responsibility of the shaman to help people make this transition successfully into their new identities by imparting the tribal myths through an initiation ritual. Because he alone knows all the secret truths, he becomes, in effect, the candidates' new mother. What I am saying is that as shaman Iago will metaphorically give birth to the world of Cyprus. How convenient of him to say on the eve of their departure: "I have't. It is engend'red. Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light."

Iago serves in the role of shaman from the time they all leave for Cyprus. At one time or another and in every crisis, he advises all the characters what they are to believe and what they are to do: Roderigo, Cassio, Othello, Montano, Desdemona, Lodovico, Gratiano, and Emilia. No young Indian brave ever had more tribal philosophy imparted to him by a tribal priest than Iago passes on to the characters in this play. Though his advice differs greatly in content, the philosophical basis is always the same: things are not as they appear to be. This is Iago's myth (or rather, his false myth); and notice that this myth of appearances distinguishes Venice from Cyprus, and is largely responsible for the creation of two different worlds which Shakespeare plays off against one another. Venice, on the one hand, is a place of peace, order, and sophistication: the Turks are not planning to invade Venice; problems there are solved in an orderly fashion by public trials before responsible men; and genteel rules for human behaviour obtain. The myth of Venice is that appearances are true. Cyprus, on the

other hand, is a place of adventure, confusion, and intrigue. At any moment the Turks may attack; no one is quite sure of the causes of many crises; and social activities generally break down and at times result in violence: games turn into insults; and a celebration becomes a brawl. The myth of Cyprus is that appearances are false. From the security of Venice, all the characters move on to a place of adventure, Cyprus.

In addition to playing off these two worlds and their myths against one another, Shakespeare also aligns his characters into camps in terms of how they relate to these two worlds. That is, one group seems to belong naturally to the world and values of Venice, while the others are associated with the world of adventure which Cyprus symbolizes. The divisions, I think, are rather obvious: Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo appear to be at greater ease in the sophisticated and orderly world of Venice; whereas Othello, Iago, and Emilia are accustomed to live in a world of adventure. Of course, putting characters into one world or another is of little consequence in itself, but it is structurally significant in terms of a ritual of initiation. For collectively all the characters in the play are attempting to become new people: but separately, they work at cross purposes: those who belong to the world of sophistication are attempting to become a part of the world of adventure: Desdemona joins the army, becomes a fair warrior, and the Captain's captain; Michael Cassio who never set a squadron in the field and who served only as messenger in the courship of Desdemona becomes Othello's lieutenant in war; and Roderigo sells his

Venetian past and goes off to war. While these sophisticated characters try to become a part of the world of adventure, Othello, Iago, and Emilia move in the opposite direction. With no war to challenge his skills, Othello tries to understand the ways of Venice and women; Iago adopts a new philosophy of life; and Emilia attempts to rise above housewifery.

These attempts by all the characters to become new and different people generate the dramatic tensions which result in the inevitable catastrophe. As we all know, only Michael Cassio survives the Rites of Initiation in Othello and in the end "rules in Cyprus." The others all fail to make it out of the forest. And the truth which Shakespeare rediscovers and affirms is that survival itself depends on things being what they appear to be. If things are not what they appear to be, then they must be purified.

Of course, one should not be tempted into making extravagant claims for the myth-ritual approach to literature, especially when one has only twenty minutes to comment on it. But, at the same time, I think this approach provides the student with a new way of responding to Othello. By other approaches, we have encouraged our students to respond to Othello in a variety of ways: as Aristotelians, for example, we invite them to see Othello as a tragic hero whose flaw is jealousy; as new critics, we lead them through the play with painstaking care (pointing out ironies and following the progress of key images); as moralists, we call Iago a Satan figure, a symbol of chaos; as literary historians, we point out 16th century dramatic

conventions and establish the place of Othello in Shakespeare's canon and in the drama of his time; and as Sociologists, we praise Shakespeare for rising above the racial prejudices of his day and our own. I do not question the legitimacy of these or the many other approaches to a work of literature. I simply suggest that myth-ritual be added, and that students be made aware that a few preferred disciplines and approaches do not hold exclusive rights to the interpretation of a writer as great as Shakespeare.